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# The impact of being moral : an ontological explanation of care ethics

Sandra Garrison  
*San Jose State University*

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THE IMPACT OF BEING MORAL:  
AN ONTOLOGICAL EXPLANATION OF CARE ETHICS

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Philosophy

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Sandra Garrison

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**APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY**

*Peter Hadreas*

Dr. Peter Hadreas, Assistant Professor Department of Philosophy

*Tom Leddy*

Dr. Thomas Leddy, Professor Department of Philosophy

*Rita Manning*

Dr. Rita Manning, Professor Department of Philosophy

**APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY**

*Joseph A. Paul*

## ABSTRACT

### THE IMPACT OF BEING MORAL: AN ONTOLOGICAL EXPLANATION OF CARE ETHICS

by Sandra Garrison

This thesis addresses the topic of developing a verifiable moral theory from Heidegger's concept of being. It examines Heidegger's explanation of 'being-in-the-world' and in particular how an ethics of care could be developed from 'being-with' relationships. In addition, this ethics of care is studied to see how it could also be a defensible view of moral realism.

Research on this subject reveals that a new theory, ontological moral realism, would be able to justify moral statements as well as encompass Heidegger's idea of 'being with'. A defense of this theory follows along with a suggested Wittgensteinian truth theory. The ontological explanation of care ethics is then illustrated through an examination of road rage where 'being with' others is shown in action. There is also a phenomenological examination of 'being with' others in a car. Some contrast is drawn from 'being with' in grocery stores as well as on the internet.



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Knowing oneself is grounded in primordially understanding being-with. It operates initially in accordance with the nearest kind of being of being-together-in-the-world in the understanding knowledge of what Da-sein circumspectly finds and takes care of with the others. Concernful taking care of things is understood in terms of what is taken care of and with an understanding of them. Thus the other is initially disclosed in the taking care of concern.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Ethical theory and the general pursuit of ethics have focused on the development of guidelines for moral behavior. Theories range from Kant's deontological, duty-based ethics and Mill's Utilitarianism, teleological ends-based ethics to Aristotle's virtue-based character ethics. Recently, the development of feminist ethics of care, founded on our caring relationship with others, has been put forth amongst the pantheon of ethical theories. The aim of these theories is to answer two main questions: what is ethical? And how can what we believe to be moral be justified? As important as it is for philosophers in ethics to attempt to address these issues, ultimately, when we look at the field of ethics there is the strong underlining presumption that humans, as a species, have a desire to be moral. In order to truly pursue ethics we must first understand why we desire to be moral in the first place.

In essence, there is a part of us that not only cares about ourselves but also others. Caring, no matter who you are, exists as a part of who we are. It is this caring which has become the basis for all of ethics despite the fact that it has

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<sup>1</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Translation: Joan Stambaugh. State University of New York Press, Albany 1996. Pg 116. Referred to as BT hereafter.

not always been acknowledged. To answer the questions that surround ethics we will first come to an understanding of the underlying basis of ethics, caring. Caring itself also has its roots. It comes from the very nature of our existence. We must examine our being, our existence, in order to comprehend our inherent care for others and thereby our motivation to be ethical. Only then can we come to develop an ethical theory that not only explains our moral motivation but also answers the main questions of what it means to be moral and how we can validate our morality.

### Being-in-the-world

In order to understand ourselves we must first explore our existence, that is the constitutive aspect of ourselves which cannot be taken away. We cannot begin to think about ourselves without the underlying assumption that we exist. We do not simply exist as a rock exists; we also have an active existence. There are certain aspects of existing that are so inextricably intertwined with our day to day lives that we cannot truly imagine life without them.

Existence implies one exists *somewhere*. In this sense, our being is located and situated in a "world". Heidegger, the philosopher credited for fathering existential thought, believes existence is "being-in-the-world". Being is in a place - "there". <sup>2</sup> Being is "being" "there". Because of this aspect of being,

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<sup>2</sup> BT, pg. 116, part 1, division 1, chapter 4

Heidegger refers to being as “dasein”, bringing together the German word for “there”, “da”, with the German word for “being”, “sein”.

For Heidegger, Being or Dasein is being-in-the-world not as an object but as an involved subject. In other words, one’s being cannot be seen as separate from the world in which it exists. There is no ‘I’ that exists separate from the world. Heidegger describes this as being’s “throwness”. We are “thrown” into a world not of our own choosing. We also do not see ourselves existing in the world without other people, other beings who are like us in that they share the same experiences of being in the world. All people are beings with whom their own being, their own existence, is a concern. All of us experience “being with” others who are in the same existential condition as ourselves.

One’s ontological existence is inextricably intertwined with both the physical world as well as with other existential subjects. We find in our very being the existential fact that we are in the world *with* other beings. Heidegger referred to this ‘Being with’ as Mitsein. As he stated,<sup>3</sup> “The disclosedness of the *Mitdasein* [Mitsein] of others which belongs to being-with means that the understanding of others already lies in the understanding of being of Da-sein [Dasein] because its being is being-with.”<sup>4</sup>

At the most basic subjective level, we are beings-in-the-world who find ourselves with other beings. This is the ontological groundwork for any truth-

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<sup>3</sup> BT, *ibid*

bearing theory including a verifiable moral realism, which will be discussed later. However, we now need to understand being-with to establish a new moral realism based at the subject or being level. For it is only by truths of our own existence as human beings that we can then truly establish an ethical theory.

### Mitsein: Being with

As mentioned, Mitsein is Heidegger's look at our individual existence and how it relates to other beings in the world. Essentially beings with other beings, we recognize this co-presence with other beings in the world. This is not in the sense of beings completely external to us as objects but as beings we relate with and depend upon. These other beings have both a self and are an 'other'.

Not only that but we are with beings that also have a subjective relationship with the world. They are also beings that are being-in-the-world. And they are beings in the same world as ourself. This is experienced as a copresence. Heidegger states that "...the world is already the one that I share with the others. The world of Da-sein [Dasein] is a *with-world*. Being-in is *being with* others. The innerworldly being-in-itself of others is *Mitda-sein* [Mitsein]."<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, we are beings who find ourselves inherently, in Heidegger's words, 'for the sake of others' because of this recognition of 'being with' in the truest sense. Heidegger believes that we identify with others to the point of

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<sup>4</sup> BT pg. 116, part 1, division 1, chapter 4

seeing others as we see ourselves. "The relation of being to others then becomes a projection of one's own being toward oneself 'into another.' The other is a double of the self."<sup>6</sup> This recognition is essential to any ethical framework since it makes ethics a concern. We become concerned about how we treat others because we recognize that other people are like ourselves. Mitsein needs to be examined in terms of ethics in order to discover how a moral truth can be derived from our ontological truth foundation.

### Mitsein and Ethics

Heidegger in Being and Time does not discuss Mitsein in terms of its ethical implications except in regard to the idea of a primordial guilt or Schuld. Schuld, translated not only as guilt but also as indebtedness or responsibility, has two forms. One is the everyday guilt, which is a product of being's unsettledness. To be at ease, dasein adopts societal standards of ethical conduct to give oneself the sense that there are indeed moral norms. When one fails to live up to these norms, guilt becomes manifest in the form of one's conscience. This helps to encourage one to continue to follow the ethical practices given by one's society. However, what everyday guilt attempts to cover

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<sup>5</sup>BT, pg. 112

up is existential guilt. Existential guilt exists just by being in the world. This primordial guilt comes from the fact that being did not choose to exist nor choose its being in the world / life situation and circumstances. As Heideggerian scholar Hubert L. Dreyfus puts it, “even if Dasein has done nothing wrong there is something wrong with Dasein – its being is not under its own power...a particular Dasein does not choose to be brought up to be masculine or feminine, for example.”<sup>7</sup> Not only do we not choose our being-in-the-world but also we are condemned to make choices that we are responsible for even though, as Heidegger argues, we have no real principles to fall back on. This is our primordial guilt. We feel guilty for the inability to determine or create our own existential condition. What results from this guilt is a call of being’s conscience to choose itself, its own being. Conscience here is the call of care that its being is an issue for it.<sup>8</sup>

To understand the ethical implications of Mitsein it is important to consider Heidegger’s concept of Fürsorge, a human being’s caring about another human being. This caring for other beings is a central element of Mitsein. It is a part of being with other beings. While Heidegger does not fully explain how Fürsorge comes out of Mitsein, he goes so far as to state that being is “for the sake of others”. Being in the world means that we not only recognize that we are being

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<sup>6</sup> BT, pg. 117

<sup>7</sup> Dreyfus, Hubert L. *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I*. The MIT Press, 1991. Pg. 306-7. Hereafter referred to as BIW.

<sup>8</sup> BIW, pg 308



with others but that because we are with others in our very being we not only care about them but we are 'for the sake of others'. Heidegger expresses this when he says that "...being-with-others belongs to the being of Da-sein, with which it is concerned [Fürsorge] in its very being. As being-with, Da-sein 'is' essentially for the sake of others." <sup>9</sup>

Through understanding Fürsorge and Mitsein, we can see that ethics is an issue at the center of our very being. It is inescapable since we are 'pushed' as Heidegger says into a caring Mitsein with others, just as we are "thrown" into our being-in-the-world. Now the question becomes, what ethical theory can we establish based on these ontological foundations? The ethical theory which most closely relates to Mitsein's caring ethical relationship is the feminist ethics of care.

### Ethics of Care and Mitsein

An ethic of care argues that the basis for our moral decisions should be our caring relationships with others. There are two main constituent parts to an ethic of care. The first, according to care ethicist Rita Manning, is a sensitivity "...to one's place in the world and to one's general obligation to be a caring person..." The other, Manning believes, is one's obligation "...to care for...[which] involves acting, in some appropriate way to respond to the needs of persons and animals, but can also be extended to responding to the needs of

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<sup>9</sup> BT, 115-116

communities, values, or objects".<sup>10</sup> In summary, we are obligated to be individuals who actively care.

As we have already seen, we indeed are, by our very being, individuals who care about and for other beings. An ethic of care can be founded on our reality as beings. Admittedly, ethics of care does vary in kind so it is important to be clear about which care ethics is being advocated.

The care ethic put forth here most closely resembles that of Nel Noddings. Noddings points out that "morality is underlain by an instinctual caring response. We are moved to help others when their needs are great and the means of helping them are clear."<sup>11</sup> This instinctual caring response is born out of our inherent relationship to other beings. As has been said, we are beings with other beings. Other's concern becomes our concern when we internalize the fact that other beings are like ourselves. However there are times when, as Noddings argues, "we must force ourselves to act in a caring fashion"; she goes on to argue that "To do this we must commit ourselves to a caring life".<sup>12</sup>

The Heideggerian view of care is helpful here. While it may come naturally from our relationship with others, what Noddings does not emphasize is how this instinctual caring response arises from these relationships. Our caring towards humanity as a whole must be included. We do have a stronger sense of

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<sup>10</sup> Manning, Rita. "Speaking from the Heart: A Feminist Perspective on Ethics." *New Feminist Perspective Series*. Ed. Rosemarie Tong. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 1992. Pg.62

<sup>11</sup> Noddings, Nel. *Caring: A Feminist approach to Ethics*. University of California Press, Ltd. 1984.Pg.105. Hereafter referred to as CF.

obligation to those we have spent time to develop a relationship with such as a family member. On the other hand, we also have a caring relationship with a stranger as well. Noddings points out we may need to force ourselves to act with care. But in order to do this we must have some basis of care from which to work. This is our caring towards humanity, which includes ourselves as a part of it.

In contrast, Mary Midgley advocates a morality based in our natural affections such as that towards our family members. These natural affections, she argues, have developed over time as a part of our evolution. Caring is a successful strategy to help the continuation of the species. In reality, this caring has existed essentially in all individuals. While caring in effect does help all individuals continue to live, it is not created by individuals to solve societal issues. It is a part of who we are as beings. This is only to re-emphasize a care ethic based not in evolution but in our ontological existence.

Marilyn Friedman does not make an evolutionary basis for a care ethic but one primarily based on the nature of reasoning. In general, she argues women use a reasoning founded in care and men use a form of reasoning based more on justice than care. Moral behavior will vary based on one's gender, according to her. She feels that justice should be considered in situations where we think care is the major concern, and care in situations that appear to call for justice.

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<sup>12</sup> CF, Pg.105

This genderized perspective on morality is also contrary to the ontological care ethic. Feelings of care towards others are not gender-based but human-based. While the female gender may embrace this ethic more fully, it does not mean, as many care ethicists would agree, that this ethic is feminine in its roots.

We can take the ideas of *Mitsein* and *Fürsorge* to give an ethic of care a stronger foundation. In the preceding arguments, it has been established that at the very center of our being we are in a caring relationship with others. This is true at the ontological level namely in the reality of our own existence. The caring relationship an ethic of care speaks of is not just what we come to learn by relating with others in the world. We care about others and are 'for the sake of others' in our very being. This can now stand as the groundwork for a moral realism which is not only care based but is also founded at the most basic level, the truth of our existence.

### Moral Realism

When we look for answers about morality and what it means to be moral, what we want to know is can we justify or even verify the actions that we deem to be morally correct? One position on this is that ethics requires the existence of moral facts. Moral realism advocates the existence of moral facts. Moral realism,

simply put, is “the view that moral statements can be true”.<sup>13</sup> To establish a moral realist position, therefore, there needs to be verifiable aspect to our ethics.

Proponents of moral realism have affirmed that ethics can have a truth bearing foundation. However, most of the focus has been on finding a way to make morality objectively verifiable. Whether the approach to truth is by the coherence theory, the correspondence theory, or even a pragmatist theory the focus is on what can be objectively verifiable.

Such approaches are often based in empirical study and all that is hoped for are synthetic a posteriori truths. What is not frequently examined, except by Kant, is the possibility for ethics to be both synthetic and a priori true. The flaw is in trying to find moral truth as if it were an object in the world separate from the self that either exists or does not exist. Even if one finds a moral claim that rationally ‘fits’, one cannot escape one’s own subjectivity. I agree with J.L. Mackie when he says:

The denial that there are objective values does not commit one to any particular view about what moral statements mean, and certainly not to the view that they are equivalent to subjective reports. No doubt if moral values are not objective they are in some very broad sense subjective...<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Manning, Rita. “Notes for Philosophy 292: Moral Realism”. WWW Publication viewed on February 1, 2000. <http://www.sjsu.edu/depts/philosophy/manning292/notes.htm>. pg. 1. Hereafter referred to as NP.

<sup>14</sup> Sayre-McCord, Geoffrey. *Essays on Moral Realism*. Cornell University Press 1988. J.L. Mackie, “The Subjectivity of Values”, pg. 97

Since any moral theory must involve the subjective, can we then create moral truths from this subjectivity in ethics? If we can find universal truths about our subjective experience of morality, we may then be able to establish moral truth based not on what we believe to be objective ethical theories but on the basis of morality itself, the truth of our being in the world.

The problem of moral verifiability is an issue with finding how subjective morals can be true apriori and not through synthetic aposteriori validity. Wittgenstein's notion of truth, as based in "forms of life", can provide a solution. Ethical truth can be found in the "forms of life", i.e. the fundamental societal contexts of humanity. Instead of using a synthetic aposteriori basis for truth, this is a foundation that provides a better groundwork for moral realism.

As Wittgensteinian scholar Marie McGinn explains "coming to share, or understand, the form of life of a group of individual human beings means mastering, or coming to understand, the intricate language-games that are essential to its characteristic practices".<sup>15</sup> In this sense there is agreement among people vis-à-vis the forms of life surrounding "existence" that can also verify ethical truth not just truth in language. For instance, being-in-the-world is an essential "form of life" that is apriori true by the nature of existence itself. Moral truth must resonate with the experience of our own humanity to be an inherently true "form of life". It must be a true "form of life" for the experience of

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<sup>15</sup> McGinn, Marie. *Wittgenstein and the Philosophical Investigations*. Routledge 1997. pg.51

existence. This takes Wittgenstein's concept "form of life" as fundamental regardless of culture or society since the focus here is on what can be experienced by the nature or our being and apriori true. "Form of life" as our truth basis along with what has been discovered so far about being and ethics shows that our desire to be ethical stems from the nature of our own existence and this in turn applied what is morally "correct".

Morality cannot be severed from ourselves. The existential aspect cannot be severed from any moral theory including the realist approach to moral truth. To ignore the essential aspects of being is to ignore the foundation for the theory itself. If one cannot have an ethical theory without accounting for truths of existence, one can also not have Moral Realism without examining existential issues as well. We are left to conclude that we must take into account truths of our existence in Moral Realism.

One basis for Moral Realism then is one founded in our own experience of our existence. In other words, by examining the core of our being, by determining the realities of our existence, we can see what is at the core of our experience of being and how it is related to ethics. An ethical theory based in our experience of our existence may also provide a similarly Being-based moral realism. This would be an ontological moral realism since it is founded in our understanding of our being and how it exists in the world with others as a "form of life". This has been demonstrated earlier in the sections on Being-in-the-world,

Mitsein 'Being with', and Mitsein and Ethics. Now we will describe and defend Ontological Moral Realism, as well as examine other accounts.

### Ontological Moral Realism

As I have argued, moral realism needs to be tied not only to an ethical theory but also a truth theory. It needs to address our being by adopting it as the perspective of truth. As stated, we are using a modified Wittgensteinian "forms of life" truth theory. The theory argues that in order for something to be true it must be a part of our being. In other words, it must be existentially validated. In this sense, ontological moral realism might be considered akin to naturalism, the view that holds what is right is a function of facts about the world including human nature. However, this is not the case since ontological moral realism is a transcendental deduction of moral truth from existential facts of being and not human nature. Our ontological condition is our basis for discovering what is true which is both being based and comes before any ethical theory. Eldred points out part of this aspect of Dasein when he says:

The inability (Nichtseinkönnen) to violate Dasein's freedom stems from its ontological status as belonging to Dasein's being, so that any ontic actions of others, no matter how violent, cannot impinge on its ontological condition, which is situated on a completely different plane. Dasein's inviolable freedom is the ontological condition of possibility for declaring human rights or enunciating any ethical principle and therefore comes before any political or moral considerations.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Eldred, Michael "Worldsharing and Encounter", '6. Addressability and proper-namedness: Dasein's inviolable Freedom'. Section 6.



Overall ethics of care proponents justify the theory on the basis that we, as moral agents, are embedded in relationships and social contexts. This would seem to be pertinent to the foundation of a “form of life” theory of truth. Heidegger’s Dasein is always in a “form of life”. There is no Dasein apart from a social context. While there is no individuality for Heidegger, there is individuation that occurs when one flees the everyday dasein to authentic dasein. One is no longer a part of the ‘they’ but recognizes the reality of one’s own being. Regardless, being is consistently a part of a “form of life”.

We have already seen how an ethic of care can be derived from the reality of being that is in-the-world and in a caring Mitsein. This has then shown us what Ontological Moral Realism is: it is the belief that moral statements can be true when they are based in our ontological condition. The ethical theory purported to be true is an ethic of care. However, just stating this will not suffice. In order to more fully understand Ontological Moral Realism, it is important to examine the implications.

### Questioning Ontological Moral Realism

To further clarify Ontological Moral Realism as a theory, Rita Manning’s questions for examining an ethical theory in terms of moral realism are useful. Manning has suggested that seven questions should be addressed: 1) What

types of moral statements can be made in this theory?<sup>17</sup> 2) What is the meaning of these statements and how would a theorist justify these statements? 3) Are they descriptive or expressive, or a bit of both? 4) Would these statements be considered to have a truth value? 5) Does the theory itself have a truth value? 6) Is this the only defensible moral theory? 7) How would a naïve user of the theory answer these same questions?

Since we are using an ontological “form of life” theory of truth, the type of moral statements that can be made in this theory would have to be from the standpoint of being. Here are some examples of possible statements that are both ontological and moral in nature:

1. “An individual being exists in the same world with other beings”
2. “Other beings also have a self and see other beings as both self and others”
3. “Being-in-the-world places us in a caring relationship (Fürsorge Mitsein) with others”
4. “Our caring relationship with others charges us in caring obligations”

These statements each portray a truth about being-in-the-world and are justified in so far as they correspond to our ontological existence. Statements 1 and 2 are ontological truths which provide the groundwork for the moral statements in 3 and 4. The statements above have been discussed indirectly

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<sup>17</sup> Manning, Rita. “Notes for Philosophy 292: Moral Realism”. WWW Publication viewed on February 1, 2000. <http://www.sjsu.edu/depts/philosophy/manning292/notes.htm>. Pg. 6. Hereafter referred to as NP.

through the course of this essay. Their truth can be discovered through introspecting one's own being.

These statements are descriptive in that they describe being's ontological condition. Some are even a bit expressive focusing on an ethic of care and the obligations involved.

Heidegger did not go so far as to say he had made true moral statements. Truth value is also derivative for Heidegger. Yet, in the way I have reconstructed his ideas with that of an ethic of care, I would say that these statements have a truth value. In addition, I believe that proponents of an ethic of care would argue that other statements based on care would have truth value as well.

However, even if the statements have truth value it does not necessarily follow that the theory itself also has a truth value. But as I have been trying to demonstrate, ethics of care is true as verified by ontological moral realism that is rooted in an ontological "forms of life" theory and in Heidegger's ontology. Only because the ethic of care is grounded in ontology can we say it has truth value.

Even if one considers ontological moral realism to have some truth, this may not be the only defensible view about moral theory. Only by exploring being further could we come up with another defensible moral theory. However, this does not mean that multiple moral theories would then be seen as being true. On the contrary, should the ethic of care turn out to be inadequate in its relationship to being, and another theory more aptly follows from our ontological

condition, then that should be the preferred theory. Of course this seems to beg the question of whether we could ever know our ethical theory is true. This would be an incorrect conclusion. It is not that the other theory would be false but that it would not satisfy as many truth conditions as the second theory. The second theory would just be better able to explain 'being with' and hence would be a stronger, more valid theory.

It is helpful, Manning suggests, to know how a naïve user of ontological moral realism might answer these same questions. In general, a naïve user would mainly answer these questions in terms of an ethic of care with being as its source. Most people can talk about and make sense of caring for and about others in part because this idea is so fundamental. The user could point out that most of us do not question whether we need to care about others or not. The problem has mainly been on how much and in what manner. This seems to indicate that care is a part of our very being and that it makes sense to formulate an ethics of care knowing this about ourselves.

### Other Accounts of Moral Realism

While answering the above questions has elucidated the idea of an ontological moral realism, it is important to see how it compares with a contrary approach to moral realism. A popular ethical theory that has been defended by moral realism is utilitarianism. Utilitarianism says that one's actions are right in

as much as they promote the greater good. In order to determine if an action is moral, one needs to examine the results or the ends of the action. If the action produces more happiness than another action would have, then it is the morally correct or true choice. True moral statements for utilitarianism are dependent on the results of action. Utilitarian moral realism hence involves a more pragmatic truth theory emphasizing that a moral statement would be true if and only if it promotes the greater good. A utilitarian moral statement would be something like "X action promotes the greater good and is therefore a moral act". The strength of this approach is that it seems to reflect how many people approach moral issues. Generally, individuals act according to what creates more good results even though this is not always for the greater good of all. In addition, it also takes into account in part the existential aspect in morality.

Nonetheless, utilitarianism has a strong weakness as well. It is difficult to be able to determine what actions ultimately will result in the greater good. This is especially the case since one does not really know the moral truth value of an act until after one has acted. While it is arguable one could have a reasonably good idea of what would truly maximize utility, ultimately utilitarian moral statements can only be validated after the fact. Even if an action is deemed morally correct and one can derive a true moral statement from it, the same action could be immoral in another instance. Utilitarianism then gives no good indicator for true and proper action. Utilitarian moral realism cannot provide

moral statements that will always be true. Utilitarianism itself may even have difficulties establishing the ethical theory as true since it is focused on the results of actions.

Ontological moral realism proves to be a stronger approach to ethical validity than utilitarianism. First, since it is based in being, moral statements do not vary based on the results of an action. The truth value of ontological moral statements in this sense is more predictable and fundamental. Also, the ontological foundation subsumes any ethical statements including those utilitarianism makes. This is because being and its relationship to the world is what ethics relies upon. Hence, utilitarianism would only be more persuasive if it was based in being. Although it is based on what is pragmatically considered to be the greatest good for the greatest number, it does not show the depth of our caring relationship with others. Ontological moral realism does this and exemplifies a theory rooted in our existence.

This does not leave out the possibility of integrating utilitarian aspects into an ontological moral realism. Utilitarianism could possibly be made a part of ontological moral realism which would feasibly add the strengths of both theories. But it must come out of the implications of an ethics of care and not the other way around. What we find though is that despite having briefly looked at another approach to moral realism, ontological moral realism continues to be a persuasive theory.

### Ethical Implications of a person's state of Being

The real question should now be: does ontological moral realism truly match up with our experience and understanding of our being in the world? One way to discover this is to examine how our being and our morality play out in the world. Since we are only with others in our day to day experiences, we need to look at how our experience of existence applies. If we can have ethical behavior in an authentic "being with" then anything less than that should prove to have ethical issues that arise.

### Care Ethics and Strangers: Being with Road Rage

One common criticism of care ethics is that it does not explain how one can have feelings of care toward strangers. The assumption here is that one must have some relationship to someone in order for the care ethic to apply. We have seen that one already has a care relationship with others by just existing in a world with others. Part of the reason care for strangers seems to be an issue is a misunderstanding of what care is. It is not a feeling in an emotional sense. It is beyond feeling. For instance, one might be really angry with your best friend even though care still exists between you both overall. Care here might more aptly be called love. While one would still have stronger care feelings towards those you are closer to, this neither frees one from one's care towards all nor

frees one from one's obligation towards others. Our obligation comes from the existential fact that other people are like ourselves. As Heidegger puts it, others are a double of the self. Our care for ourselves should then be the same care for the other even for those we do not even know.

If our ethics is grounded in our relationship with other beings, only if we do not recognize this relationship or have issues with our own being will we find behavior contrary to that ethos. We need to truly understand our being in order to be able to act ethically. People in general do understand their being to some degree and our ethical behavior may indeed be a reflection of this. Circumstances that surround being do not determine our actions but can either promote or inhibit a certain way of being.

Technology is a part of the current circumstantial framework. The question then becomes does technology in a particular instance help or hinder authentic being? Arguably one situation where technology may be affecting our ethical way of being is with cars. While we are aided in many areas by the use of vehicles, we also need to recognize how using cars changes the dwelling place of being and can alter being's perception of others, directing us toward more inauthentic ways of being.

An example that illustrates care and how it is still very present with strangers is road rage. Many of us are familiar with and have most likely experienced "road rage". Road rage occurs when individuals take out their



aggressions on the road. Road rage is being out of whack. One could consider this a form of inauthentic dasein acted out in the world. Road rage stems from recognizing the other as being like oneself but not being treated by the other as a self. This unreciprocated care is akin to denying one's own being. In this way people are incited to react by negating the other's being as well through futilely attempting to remove care. On the road this is shown through various acts that attempt to force a recognition of being by the other.

The Subcommittee on Surface Transportation in their hearing on "Road Rage: Causes and Dangers of Aggressive Driving" reflects this idea:

The car is often considered an extension of personal space. People become contentious when someone encroaches on that private territory, such as being cut off or bumped from behind. In Colorado Springs, a 55 year-old man persuaded a 17 year-old boy who had been tailgating him to pull off to the side of the road. An argument ensued and instead of a reprimand, he fatally shot the boy.<sup>18</sup>

There is a fascinating kind of "being with" when people drive on the road with other drivers. People reveal themselves in their cars. How we feel and react to people is somehow amplified in driving situations. Our perception overrules anyone else's since we are in the driver's seat and others can only respond through car movements. If a person has a desire to have control over situations in general, they are confounded by being in a car. They often feel the

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<sup>18</sup> Subcommittee on Surface Transportation, "Road Rage: Causes and Dangers of Aggressive Driving", July 17, 1997. <http://www.house.gov/transportation/surface/sthearin/ist717/ist717.htm>. Hereafter referred to as SST.

need to reassert their control. Similarly those who are competitive feel the need to race ahead of a car that was trying to pull in front of them.

One aspect of driving may be related to the need for control. When one feels powerless on the road, people move to re-establish their power. Prof. James Leon feels that:

In much of life, people feel they don't have full control of their destiny. But a car--unlike, say, a career or a spouse--responds reliably to one's wish. In automobiles, we have an increased (but false) sense of invincibility. Other drivers become dehumanized, mere appendages to a competing machine. 'You have the illusion you're alone and master, dislocated from other drivers,' says Hawaii's James.<sup>19</sup>

People in general want to feel that they have some control over their own fate and that their needs are important and respected.

Following the rules of the road has a stronger sense of importance than most other societal rules of conduct. Should someone decide to go through a red light there is a direct risk to others. A speeding driver could lose control of their vehicle and also cause severe harm. Most of the time people will follow the minimum rules of the road they need to follow to get to where they are going, and there is a sense of mutual agreement with other drivers that they will do the same. However, people are motivated by their personal goals on the road and will often push the limit of these rules when in their perceived best interest. They

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<sup>19</sup> Vest, Jason, Warren Cohen, and Mike Tharp, "Road rage USA". *US News & World Report*, 1997-06-02.  
<http://www.drivers.com/cgi-bin/go.cgi?type=ART&id=000000169&static=1>.  
Hereafter referred to as USN.

“gas it” at a yellow light or go over the speed limit just so they can get to their destination more quickly or more enjoyably. In this sense driving on the road is a very immediate conflict of your own desires versus that of others and that of society’s.

James Palmer, who is a Professor in the Health Education and Safety Department at Minnesota’s St. Cloud State University, believes that “ ‘People get on a time line for their car trips. ... When they perceive that someone is impeding their progress or invading their agenda, they respond with what they consider to be 'instructive' behavior, which might be as simple as flashing their lights to something more combative.’ ” <sup>20</sup>

Unlike most of our day to day activities, driving does not involve a strong sense of others being present with you. Except for the possibility of being pulled over by the police, there is also no sense of immediate repercussions for one’s actions. This gives us a certain freedom, a freedom to express some of our inmost feelings of how we are treated by others. Road rage often becomes an outlet for these feelings. If you feel you have suffered injustice in life, you may feel more comfortable on the road in taking justice into your own hands. You make sure others behave as you feel they should and treat you the way you feel you should be treated. If someone cuts you off on the road it is taken as a personal assault on your belief about proper road behavior. Often others acting

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<sup>20</sup> USN, *ibid.*

outside of the rules are seen as selfish and rude, acting for their benefit, just plain dumb, not paying attention to the road, or simply irresponsible. Societal rules at play may even become more resolute because of the danger involved.

Arnold Nerenberg, a Los Angeles psychologist who treats patients experiencing road rage, feels that "When it's just somebody else in a car, it's more two-dimensional; the other person's identity boils down to, 'You're someone who did something bad to me.' " <sup>21</sup>

Professor James of the University of Hawaii has suggested that part of the problem is the encouraging of defensive driving techniques treating other drivers as the enemy instead of focusing on a more "supportive driving" approach. <sup>22</sup> It was even argued by Professor James that part of the problem is the fact that cars have become safer in recent years. Higher safety standards and features may give "motorists a greater sense of invulnerability. With this inflated sense of safety, they may take more chances on the road and thereby drive more aggressively." <sup>23</sup>

What these theories fail to explain is how road rage is personalized. We know people take the actions of others on the road personally but why? Here the Heideggerian concepts can prove helpful.

Even though the person who is for instance changing lanes abruptly may occasionally do it to cause personal offense, the person witnessing the act

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<sup>21</sup> USN, *ibid.*

seems to take others driving behaviors more personally than he/she believes their actions on the road are to be taken. Here we see an imbalance of “being with” others. The person driving sees their actions as primarily impersonal while perceiving other’s driving as personal.

### Phenomenological Examination of Being in a Car

In order to understand how one’s being is affected by cars in a way that might promote road rage, we need to examine the situation being has been placed in. On the road one is first and foremost in a car. How a person interacts with a car must then be first issue for dasein. The car is a ready-to hand object. Unless the car breaks down or is out of gas, the car is ready for you to use as you wish.

Why is the person in the car in the first place? Most often there is a destination at hand. The car is for your personal transportation needs and is there to satisfy your desire to efficiently move to various locales. Many things could interfere with this, a breakdown is one example, so would a person who cuts you off on the road is another. Any sort of breakdown of your ideal efficient car travel will become an issue.

Furthermore, there is the setting for interacting with others, in this case others who are in cars. Granted there will often be bicyclist, pedestrians and the

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<sup>22</sup> USN, *ibid.*

like but it is easier to focus on cars for the case at hand. What is interesting about dealing with others in cars is the fact that you appear to only be indirectly dealing with a person. You most often do not see their face or most of their physical body. One must understand the other's motivation and being based primarily on the actions of the car.

Also, there is a difference based on the type of route or location. For instance, traveling on a rural road versus the highway. A rural road could be considered a better 'dwelling' place for being that allows for the unity of sky, earth, mortals and divinities. A highway is restrictive and forces the flow of traffic in particular directions. It is a closed environment in many ways. This becomes particularly apparent in heavy traffic where one gets the sense of being trapped.

Another factor is the culture of the locale. A small farming community will differ greatly from that of the larger city not only in terms of how people are used to dealing with each other but also in how they think people should behave in cars. People are also more likely to know one another and associate a particular car with a particular person. The car is not just some anonymous person out there but someone you know and recognize. Once you fully recognize another's humanity you can no longer treat them as a mere object.

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<sup>23</sup> SST

Additionally, one must examine how many other people there are in a given situation. Are you dealing with the morning commute traffic or a Sunday afternoon lull? The difference here would mainly be what I would call the “crowd factor”. Similar to the contrast between being with one person in an elevator and being with twenty, being’s relation to others changes as the quantity of individuals interacting with one another or merely in each other’s presence increases. In traffic there are several people that are all in the same circumstances. However, one experiences the situation as an individual. Often we will project the motivations of others in part because there are so many people present all of whom are individuated only by the cars they drive and how the cars they drive move.

Another important aspect is the fact that there is a sense of less accountability when you are driving a car. Part of the reason is the lack of the direct human interaction, which carries with it a stronger sense of “being-with”. But there is also the simple fact that if you commit some harm or offense on the road while driving one can drive away. Because there is not a strong sense of “being-with” in a car, this identification with others as being like oneself, one does not feel accountable towards the other nor does the flight from an altercation appear to be something guiltworthy. One is free to invent whatever intention one pleases because there is not a direct action from the other to correct you. Road rage occurs when one is frustrated by the fact that one’s own being is not being

recognized by other drivers/other beings. It is essential to the core of dasein to be recognized as “one of the others”.

Dasein is an involved subject on the road and still expects others to relate in a typical being-with relationship. The problem is being-with-others on the road makes it more like you are being-with cars and not with other existential subjects of care. Your actions in a car are towards cars while others' actions are toward you. Being can recognize this phenomenological tendency and overcome it by identifying with other cars on the road as other beings like themselves.

Interestingly, when someone does something kind for you on the road there is generally an attempt to recognize the other person's being by for instance simply waving or attempting to make eye contact. This is also the most effective way to get someone to help you while driving is to add a human element. It becomes more difficult for us to treat someone as merely an object thwarting our intentions when we recognize another's humanity. This recognition is also a recognition that the other person has their own goals and desires like yourself creating a more authentic being-with which makes it difficult to not care for the other in some manner.

One should not take this to mean that all people will react the same to the same set of circumstances. They do not. The difference is in their relation to their own being and in how they view other beings. Even in the direst of



circumstances being can rise above by realizing the truth of being which alters their ethics and their actions.

### Grocery store vs. Highways

To understand why road rage shows a different mode of Being-with, we can also look at another familiar situation: the grocery cart line. While both individuals are with a vehicle, cars for roads and grocery carts for stores, and both are situations where people have specific goals and end up in “lines”, there are differences between these two situations. Illustrating the importance of sensing the true presence of the other, one must recognize other beings as having the same being as yourself. We easily forget about other beings when we are lost in the “they”. Part of what makes this comparison interesting is that fact that there are not similar “road rage” like incidents. The issues that do arise from conflict in a grocery store line differ in both degree and kind. One explanation for this is the change of environment and situation for being and relationships to other beings.

The first area that is noticeably different with a grocery cart line is that people are not in cars but are there in person. The grocery cart or basket is the only vehicle present. When a person is immediately present they are less likely to be treated as just a part of the “they” and increase the likelihood that a person will behave morally because they cannot escape the other’s humanness which is

their being. There is still the aspect of being goal driven as well as the need to wait in line similar to waiting in a traffic line.

### Road Rage on the Internet Superhighway

Another valuable comparison is internet communication such as email. Here there are no vehicles or lines per se but the other's physical presence is completely absent with most email use. One's physical presence is only partly removed from dasein in a car and road rage is an impact of this loss in being-with-others. With email, there is a similar impact to being-with. While there is no road rage per se, there are violent emotional reactions that occur online. One example is what is called "flaming" which is an offensive attacking email sent to someone for a perceived wrong-doing. Unlike being in a car, people can and do communicate with each other more directly than they do in a car. People interact with email, in instant messages or in chat rooms. In a car you mainly have the communication of your car which includes a horn or turn signals and general car "body language" and the occasional physical gesture or expression that can be conveyed while passing a vehicle. However, with email people are able to communicate with one another through their words even though one is still limited from being able to read any body language. The closest a person can do to express one's feelings is through words or emoticons such as ' : ( ' for sadness

or ' :-D ' for happiness. This has the benefit of giving one a greater sense of being with another person than when one is in a car.

Part of what is interesting about the internet is that you can affect a large group and a wide span of people all over the world very efficiently, which would be very difficult to do otherwise. Overall the problem is adding the human element and not the internet or a car. The internet is akin to a piece of paper, which does not know or affect the content it carries. Any form of technology can be used for positive or negative purposes. Ultimately it comes down to the user of the product and not the product itself. Both with the internet and with cars, however, the technology itself creates distance between others that must consciously be overcome. This barrier makes it more difficult for dasein to "care" for others. These technologies do give direct human to human "being with" which provides a more recognizable connection to the other as being like oneself. Only with dasein's conscious recognition of this distance and an inner reassertion of all beings being like oneself can dasein behave ethically.

### Concluding Remarks

While it is clearly difficult to ever have a completely sufficient moral realist position, an ontologically based moral realism does appear to have some weight. We have seen that there are issues with trying to just have an objective solution

to moral realism. And an ontologically based theory avoids some of the problems with a moral realist position. Using Heideggerian concepts, we examined being-in-the-world, how our being is in-the-world with others [Mitsein], and how being-with involve caring for and being for the sake of others [Fürsorge]. This ontological footwork enabled an ethic of care to be founded in being. Using this and an ontological theory of truth creates an ontological moral realism. Ontological moral realism could then be explicated and discussed in terms of its implications. We are beings who exist in a world that we share with other beings whom we care for and about at the core of our existence. To know ourselves is, in this way, to know what is morally true. Looking at the quote in the beginning once again, moral truth should ring true to us and it does with ontological moral realism where the truth of our being is the basis for our ethics, an ethics of care.

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